

BLACK SAND

: BURT JONES & MAURINE SHIMLOCK

REVELATIONS

> IN EARLY SEPTEMBER 2008 WE BEGAN AN EXPLORATORY SURVEY OF RAJA AMPAT AS PART OF OUR WORK AS DIVE TOURISM CONSULTANTS FOR CONSERVATION INTERNATIONAL (CI). ARCING NORTH AND WEST OF MAINLAND PAPUA, INDONESIA'S EASTERNMOST PROVINCE IS NOW ONE OF THE WORLD'S HOTTEST DIVE DESTINATIONS. DISCOVERING NEW SITES AND DOCUMENTING THEM, ESPECIALLY IN A PLACE LIKE RAJA AMPAT, IS A DREAM FOR ANY MARINE LIFE PHOTOGRAPHER, BUT IT REALLY IS WORK AND WE HAD SPECIFIC GOALS.

Our aim was to expand the range of diving to include more sites where unusual animals like mimic octopus and ghost pipefish could be observed reliably. Other objectives were to locate more sites equal to or surpassing Dampier Strait's known fish aggregation dives, and to find additional sites as beautifully diverse as southeast Misool's colour-washed reefs.

We embarked on phase one, finding critter sites, because we were under a deadline to include them in the Raja Ampat dive guide (published recently by CI). One of our missions was to change the diving public's perception of Raja as a great place to see schools of fish and healthy beautiful reefs, but not so great if you wanted to see a flamboyant cuttlefish or a tiger shrimp. Even though Raja Ampat's reefs have been declared the most bio-diverse in the world, critter or muck diving, while extremely popular in Indonesia's macro-meccas of Lembeh Strait and Ambon, has not been a big part of Raja Ampat's appeal.

When liveaboards depart Sorong for a trip through Raja Ampat, they usually steer clear of Batanta's foreboding southwestern quadrant to avoid the logjams of detritus that often clog the narrow Sagewin Strait separating Batanta from Salawati. When

Clockwise from main: Warty Frogfish are seldom encountered in Raja Ampat, more than likely they are present but are overlooked because reef growth is so dense; Toadfish under the Fuel Dock; Schooling yellow lined snappers at Daram; Cockatoo waspfish at Aljui Bay.



we had motored past southwest Batanta on previous trips, we'd observed the three main elements of good muck diving: dark sand, fresh water inlets, and small bays or coves where critters can benefit from passing currents but still thrive in basically sheltered waters. Anticipating we'd find some good muck dives, Batanta is where we started looking for critters in Raja.

During the initial survey we explored a number of bays along this stretch of coastline and logged several excellent



dives at the sites Algae Patch 1 and 2. Prior to our survey liveaboard divemasters had reported finding a few nudibranchs and pipefish in these small bays, but no one had yet fully documented the area. During our exploratory dives on the neighbouring black sand and rubble slopes we found substantial numbers of nudibranchs, three species of ghost pipefish, both mimic and wonderpus octopuses, a tiger shrimp pair, and enough other unusual creatures to realize we'd discovered a critter 'sweet spot'.

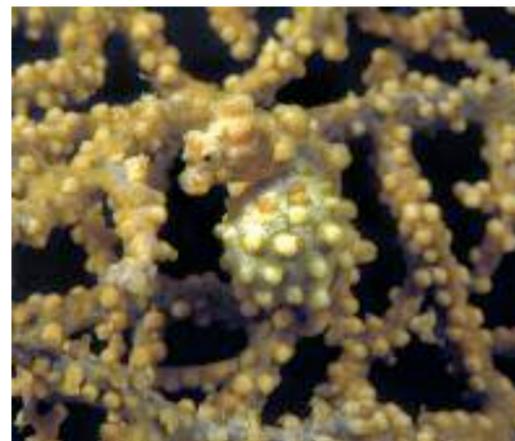
Excited about our new finds, we tried to take every group we led through Raja Ampat to the Algae Patches. On our final trip last year an unseasonable wind blew through the Sagewin Strait sending an impossible swell through Algae Patch 2's small bay. We were returning to Sorong Harbour so we only had time to move to another protected bay west of the current anchorage. As far as we knew no one had dived there before, but the position of this bay's opening quieted the swell, allowing divers in the water without fear of swamping the dinghies. I was first to descend and nearly landed on a mimic octopus, a very auspicious omen! Throughout the day all the divers reveled in the weird and wonderful from winged pipefish to warty frogfish. A general consensus named the site 'Happy Ending'.

We were convinced that other areas of Raja Ampat had the kind of muck diving we were looking for, so we revisited Aljui Bay which had always had the reputation of Raja's best critter spot. A few kilometres inside Aljui, Cendana/Atlas South Sea Pearls operates one of Raja Ampat's largest and most productive pearl farms. The jetties have become overgrown with encrusting marine life over time and attract a nice mix of critters. On a night dive near the Fuel Dock we photographed four different blue ring octopuses, certainly a record for any muck site. Halimeda ghost pipefish, toadfish, bobtail squid, and cockatoo waspfish soon followed.

This page clockwise from top left: Pygmy cuttlefish at Happy Ending; Halimeda ghost pipefish at Arrow Wall; Toadfish at the Fuel Dock; Winged pipefish at Algae Patch II; Blue-ring octopus at the Fuel Dock; Tiger Shrimp at Algae Patch II.

Opposite page clockwise from top left: Bargibanti seahorse at Aljui Bay; Schooling batfish at Boo; Unidentified nudibranch at Algae Patch II; Golden sweepers at Blue Magic.

ONE OF THE MOST RADIANT REEFS IN ALL OF RAJA AMPAT, WARNA WARNA LITERALLY MEANS 'VIBRANT COLOUR' IN BAHASA INDONESIA



Phase two of our quest was completed in March 2010. We targeted two areas, Daram and the Dampier Strait for fish life and healthy beautiful reefs. Daram is the small island group east of the Boo-Fiabacet chain, arguably the most stunning tropical reef on the planet. But in the peak diving season liveaboards tend to pile up at Boo and Fiabacet so one of our aims was to find competitive sites.

We invited our Australian dive buddy, Roger Steene to join us on MY Seven Seas for part of this exploratory trip. Concentrating our search near Andiamo and Candy Store, two Daram sites we discovered in 2009, we weren't disappointed. Roger had been craving "more colour, more bloody colour", so we sent him off to photograph tunicates, while we surveyed the area east of Andiamo, looking for colourful reefs and abundant fish life.

We were wowed by Warna Warna ('Vibrant Colour' in Bahasa Indonesia), an exceptional site, and one of the most radiant reefs in all of Raja Ampat. Typical of the area, Warna Warna's north wall is covered in short-growing pastel soft corals that form a bed for the larger purple and pink soft corals, red and white seafans,

and enormous barrel sponges jutting out from the steeply sloping wall. The site boasts pinnacles on both the east and west quadrants equally as spectacular as the main wall. Excellent fish life: fusiliers, surgeonfish, a small school of barracuda, and profuse schools of anthias all milled about in the falling tide. As with most of Daram's sites, Warna Warna should be dived when the tide falls from the north so that the current excites the fish and the soft corals to the max.

From Daram we headed north to the Dampier Strait for a visit to the just-opened Raja Ampat Dive Lodge. Operated by Grand Komodo, the lodge is an excellent option for land-based stays in northern Raja Ampat. A mere 10 minute tender ride from the well known manta aggregation sites Manta Sandy and Manta Ridge, the resort also is close to some excellent sites for schooling fish.

We rarely name sites after marine life; invariably someone will dive there and not see the signature species. Hard to imagine this happening at 'Lalosi' ('fusilier' in the local Papuan language), as there were so many fusiliers the lovely hard coral gardens were completely obscured. 'Fish thunder' actually cavitation, the sound that occurs when large schools rapidly change direction under water, reverberated constantly.

On the north side of nearby west Mansuar Island's corner, we found a slope covered in hard coral bommies decorated with seafans and soft corals. There's been some damage to the reef, but what remains is teeming with fish. Barracuda, trevally, snappers, and batfish milled about the reef slope anticipating a change in the current, while so many silvery baitfish hovered over the coral I had to brush them away to take a decent wide angle image.

On our last diving day we headed east intending to dive at Mioskon, one of Dampier's celebrated sites, but we were distracted by a cloud of seabirds and two local canoes zigzagging over a roiling patch of sea. We motored closer, knowing there had to be a lot of fish action just beneath the surface. The water was clear enough to see a hard coral ridge about 10 metres below, so we dropped in and hung into the current. Out in the blue, marauding dogtooth tuna and Spanish mackerel sliced through mixed schools of fusiliers, while several hundred





jacks, barracuda, and smaller tuna scattered as we descended.

Transfixed by the scene, I didn't hear our dive guide, Paul, frantically banging on his tank. Finally Burt got my attention and pointed to one of the largest mantas I've ever seen hovering over a bommie near the top of the reef. Not expecting the manta to stay around, I obliged my husband (who was carrying a macro rig) and slowly ascended to the coral head where a squadron of wrasse was cleaning the manta. While Paul and Burt hung on the ascent line and watched the

show, my encounter turned into a 15 minute display of swoops and swirls as this magnificent animal repeatedly returned to the cleaning station. On the way back to the lodge, our tender driver said, "I've heard some people call this site Blue Magic." We agreed.

Although over for the season, our explorations of Raja Ampat are far from complete. The area covers more than 55,000 square kilometres and contains so many diverse habitats it will take years to chart all its special places. We can't wait to look for muck in northern

Salawati's small bays, or to investigate rumors of baitballs near the turtle sanctuary at Piai, or, perhaps, reveal the mysteries of the never-before-dived seamounts of Raja Ampat's far-flung northern reefs.

Left to right: Schooling sweetlips at West Mansuar Corner; Regal angelfish at Mangrove Ridge.

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